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# 1

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2004, Jonathan Coe analysed the contemporary British novel thus:

In the [last] three decades the British novel has reinvigorated itself ... by recognizing the multi-ethnicity of modern Britain and opening itself to influences from other cultures; by tapping into the energies of popular film, music and television; by turning its back on modernist elitism and rediscovering the pleasures of humour, storytelling, demotic, and so on.

(2004b, 6)

Taking this quotation as the starting point, this book invites the reader to examine Coe's fictional production since 1987 and assess the extent to which it shares the features described above. A 'novelist who loves (traditional) novels' (2004b, 7), Coe proudly belongs to that category of writers who, like Salman Rushdie, Jeanette Winterson or Graham Swift, still believe in the powerful drive of story-telling. Just as stories continue to be 'the bedrock of the novel', for Coe, 'narrative curiosity ... remains the centrifugal force which draws readers back to the novel' (2004b, 6). Rather surprisingly, although Coe considers England as 'a nation of narrators' and stories as 'the Englishman's preferred method of making sense of the world' (2003), his novels are better received in France and Italy than in England. And yet Coe feels few affinities for such representatives of the French *Nouveau Roman* as Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute or Claude Simon, or for radical modernist or postmodernist writers (with the notable exception

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of B.S. Johnson), and asserts his attachment to such supposedly outmoded devices as plot, characterization and suspension of disbelief. When he was at university, he felt bewildered and confused by some of the experimental writers he was reading and saw ‘the high modernism of Joyce and Beckett as a straightjacket the novel had to break out of’ (2004b, 6): ‘Someone had instilled at the back of my mind a quaint notion that novels should have an emotional as well as a cerebral impact, that they should contain characters with whom the reader was made to sympathise, that they should carry the reader, buoyed by curiosity, on a propulsive narrative journey’ (2013d).

In 1994, ten years before writing about the reinvigoration of the British novel, Coe had published a fairly pessimistic essay on the state of the novel in Britain, which he would later judge too radical:

My own impression is that the majority of literary novels being published here at the moment, while full of intelligent ideas and in general very accomplished stylistically, are none the less weak on plot, weak on character and shy of formal innovation: somehow, it would seem, we have evolved a brand of novel that contrives at once to be both middlebrow and deeply, irredeemably unpopular.

(1994d, 10)

Although Coe would no longer adhere to such a statement today, it helps to delineate the types of novels he prefers and aims to produce, ones that oscillate between experimentation and tradition. In 2014, Coe remarked that he admires music composer Sean O’Hagan of The High Llamas because he ‘combines experimentalism with accessibility’, as Coe tries to do in his own books (in Okereke). Although he has been described a conventional inheritor ‘of the liberal-realist mode of political fiction’ (Head, 2006, 243), Coe’s career from his debut novel, *The Accidental Woman* (1987), to his most recent book, *Number 11, or Tales that Witness Madness* (2015), is marked by several changes of direction, which should deter anyone from hastily applying constricting labels to his work. Coe is not only an heir to the tradition of the English comic and satirical novel or to the social realism of the 1950s, and not only the postmodernist writer that some critics saw in *What a Carve Up!* (1994). His experimentations with

narrative, genre, perspective and voice, and his concerns with issues relating to history, class, truth, memory, loss and nostalgia, demonstrate the extent of his creative spectrum and sensibility. The aim of this introduction will be to identify and chart the main directions taken by Coe's fiction over the years, first by highlighting his interest in the depiction of contemporary Britain and his relation to political engagement, then by focusing on his fondness for humour, comedy and satire, alongside his veer towards melancholy, and finally by drawing attention to the narrative and generic polyphony of his work.

One may distinguish two trends in contemporary British fiction: one towards retro-Victorian fiction and pastiche, and another resolutely anchored in the present, dealing with topical issues, Coe belonging to the latter (Noiville, 297). In the early 1990s, the success of such novels as Rose Tremain's *Restoration* (1989) and A.S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990) 'led to a feeling that what the British novelist excelled at was a kind of historical pastiche', so that 'a generation of younger critics and reviewers', including Coe, 'grumbled that "contemporary" British life was being under-represented in our fiction' (Coe, 2013d). This fixation on the past was, for example, epitomized by the 2001 Booker Prize longlist on which only three out of 22 books were set in contemporary Britain. As a consequence of his dissatisfaction with this situation, Coe decided to write a book on the Thatcher decade: 'a large-scale, panoramic representation of what Britain looked like (to [him]) at that particular historical moment' (2013d). The result was *What a Carve Up!*, a novel which revealed Coe's ability to anchor 'his universal truths in the immediacy of contemporary society', to articulate 'the great and the small, the destiny of nations and the heartbeat of beings' (Noiville, 298–9).

In *What a Carve Up!*, two characters, Grahame Packard and Michael Owen, hold a discussion about the situation of the novel at the beginning of the 1980s. Graham, who is on a film-making course, does not understand 'why people write novels any more' (276), borrowing some of his arguments from B.S. Johnson's *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs* (11–13). This student directed a ten-minute 'efficient if unsubtle' film about the Falklands conflict called 'Mrs Thatcher's War' (280) and hyperbolically laments the fact that 'there is no tradition of political engagement' in the British novel: 'it's all just a lot of pissing about within

the limits set down by bourgeois morality' (276). As for Michael Owen, he expresses a wish in one of his literary reviews: 'We stand badly in need of novels ... which show an understanding of the ideological hijack which has taken place so recently in this country, which can see its consequences in human terms and show that the appropriate response lies not merely in sorrow and anger but in mad, incredulous laughter' (277).

Quoting this passage 15 years after its publication, Coe cringes with embarrassment at that 'brazen' and 'lofty pronouncement' and wonders whether this 'little manifesto' reflected his 'personal views, or whether it was a slippery parody of them', but he admits it was 'a clear statement of the author's personal ambitions' (2013d) in a novel that combines political awareness with a comic satire of the worst excesses of Thatcherism and the ruling elite. As such, it can be related to other novels about Britain under Thatcher such as Ian McEwan's *The Child in Time* (1987), David Lodge's *Nice Work* (1988), Tim Lott's *Rumours of a Hurricane* (2002), Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004), David Peace's *GB84* (2004) or Philip Hensher's *The Northern Clemency* (2008). While many considered Martin Amis's *Money* (1984) as 'the 1980s political novel *par excellence*', Coe argues that Alasdair Gray's 1982, *Janine* (1984) 'skewered the early years of Thatcherism' with a greater 'prescience and accuracy' (2013d). Coe himself is not only interested in Thatcherism but also in the periods that precede and follow the Thatcher era: *The Rotters' Club* (2001) is a realist depiction of the effects of deregulation and the free market on the trade unions and the car industry, as well as a portrait of the growth of nationalism and xenophobia in the 1970s, while *The Closed Circle* (2004) mocks the political opportunism of New Labour, as well as the unhealthy power of spin-doctors and of the media in general. In *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* (2010), set in 2009, the narrator regularly refers to the financial difficulties experienced by companies, relating it in particular to the 'credit crunch' (89) and to the concept of 'leverage' in investment banking (23, 121, 258), and one of the younger characters launches an impassioned attack against the previous generation: 'We may be Mrs Thatcher's children, as far as you're concerned, but *you* were the ones who voted for her, again and again, and then carried on voting for all the people who came after her, and followed exactly in her footsteps. You're the ones who brought us up to be these consumerist zombies' (37–8).

In the same novel, an elderly lady rails against England, a country ‘happily allowing itself to be killed off by the power of the big corporations’ (197), while a spiritual eccentric abhors ‘the material world ... where people spend their lives making things and then buying and selling and using and consuming them’ (264). *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* thus chimes with the emerging genre of ‘Crunch Lit’ which responds to the 2007–08 credit crunch and the effects of the financial crisis on British society, and is exemplified by such novels as Sebastian Faulks’s *A Week in December* (2009), Justin Cartwright’s *Other People’s Money* (2011), John Lanchester’s *Capital* (2012) or Mark Lawson’s *The Deaths* (2013).

According to Richard Bradford, Coe’s work raises ‘the question of how the novelist is expected to deal with contemporaneity’ (43). Looking back over the last 25 years of the twentieth century, Tim Adams notes that ‘only a handful of significant English novels have responded directly to the monumental changes in the society of our times’ – among them, Amis’s *Money* and ten years later, Coe’s *What a Carve Up!*. While the literary production of the 1990s in Britain was mainly interested in the past and disconnected from the here and now, Coe’s novels are all set in contemporary Britain and one of his talents consists in successfully evoking a specific period and place. To give a brief survey of the time range of his novels, *The Rain Before it Falls* (2007) relates events in the life of the main character from the 1940s – a time when ‘creamy, brownish white’ colours were popular, ‘as if people were afraid to let any real light and brightness into their lives’ (92) – to 2007. *Expo 58* (2013) is set in London and Brussels in 1958 during the postwar consensus of the welfare state, but also the last days of buttoned-up Britain. *The Rotters’ Club* focuses on the ‘inert 1970s’ (Coe, 2013d) when everything was brown-coloured: ‘These were brown times’, the narrator mockingly remarks (15). Coe’s first three novels are set in the 1980s while *What a Carve Up!* and *The House of Sleep* (1997) deal with the 1980s and 1990s. *The Closed Circle* and *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* are situated at the beginning of the third millennium, and Coe’s new novel, *Number 11* (to be published in November 2015), covers the period from 1999 to 2015.

Coe’s fictional work thus provides the reader with illuminating snapshots of the present and the recent past ‘without succumbing to a kind of easy nostalgia’ (2013d). In *The Rotters’ Club*, from the vantage point of 2003 in Berlin, the middle-aged narrator takes

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her interlocutor and the reader back in time to the Britain of 1973, to a 'past that is a foreign country', 'a country that neither of us would recognize, probably' (3). In 1999, Doug Anderton also takes a retrospective glance but warns his audience against any longing for the 1970s (176), and in *The Closed Circle*, Claire, also in 1999, is reluctant to attend 'an evening of slightly morbid nostalgia' with her former school friends (26), while Paul Trotter is opportunistically pretending to have fond memories of 'the far-off, touchingly innocent days of the late 1970s' (60). In various articles, Coe points out that Britain at the time was 'a dismal and stagnant place' where the trade unions were 'perpetually involved in bitter and increasingly violent confrontations with the representatives of capital, a shabby country with a failing economy, obsessed with memories of its former Imperial glory, taking refuge in tradition and outdated ritual in an attempt to forget its contemporary problems' (2013d).

The 1980s did not see any receding of the social and political disquiet and in *What a Carve Up!*, Michael Owen remarks: 'The 1980s weren't a good time for me on the whole. I suppose they weren't for a lot of people' (102). That Tory era was indeed marked by 'a new meanness, an aggressive triumphalism' (Coe, 2013d), with such major events as the Falklands War (1982), the miners' strikes (1984–85) and the American bombing raid on Libya (1986). In *The Accidental Woman*, a character contrasts the Age of Enlightenment with the early 1980s, described as 'the age of consent' (115), while Robert Wyatt (a musician Coe admires) describes them as 'the Age of Self' in one of his songs (in Coe, 2013d). In *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*, the protagonist's father sees the 1980s as 'vaulting, sleek and glittery', like the new tower blocks in the city of London in 1987 (246), while in an interview, Coe described the decade as 'vibrant, energetic, ruthless, dynamic', an energy he tried to infuse in his novel even if he disapproved of the main ethos (in Taylor, Charles).

Coe not only sets his novels in modern Britain, but also firmly engages with the political, social and economic failings of the contemporary world, identifying similar aesthetic perspectives in fellow British writers such as Rose Tremain, Amanda Craig, Will Self, Marina Lewycka, Nicola Barker, Martin Amis and John Lanchester (Coe, 2013d). In 'Outside the Whale' (1984), Salman Rushdie insists on the political dimension of any work of art – 'works of art, even works of entertainment, do not come into being in a social and political vacuum; ... the way they operate in a society cannot

be separated from politics' (92) – and he points to 'a genuine need for political fiction': 'it becomes necessary and even exhilarating, to grapple with the special problems created by the incorporation of political material' (100). While Rushdie's words made perfect sense in the context of development of the international (or postcolonial) novel, they also fit a more national and English framework in which poetics and politics are bound to meet. Coe's own conception of the political has a particularly wide range as he argues that 'all storytelling is political, being an attempt to control and influence the imaginative life of another person for a period of time' (2013d). In his PhD thesis on Henry Fielding, he referred to *Tom Jones* (1749) as a 'political novel' because Fielding 'seizes on the form's potential for enacting change in narrative terms and for provoking it in the reader' (1986, 235). Coe himself is interested in analysing 'one of the smallest political units' – the family – and the political dynamic between parents and children (Coe, 2013d), and his writing is both politically engaged with the society it dissects and concerned with the individual's relationship to society. In Coe's words, 'the theme is always the relationship between individuals and larger social movements' (in Murphy) and the thrust of what he calls his political novels is 'to show people trying to get on with small, blameless lives without being flattened by the juggernaut of historical events over which they have no control' (in May, 2007, 69).

However, following the death of Margaret Thatcher in April 2013, Jason Cowley pointed to the lack of a figure 'with the significance and commitment of George Orwell or H.G. Wells' in the literary-political landscape, a figure one could 'turn [to] and learn from at moments of national consequence or crisis'. According to Cowley, who borrows Matthew Arnold's phrase from *Culture and Anarchy*, Orwell and Wells helped us 'to see things as they really are'. He provides a definition of the committed political novelist as 'one who simultaneously asks questions of the society in which they live and tells important truths about it'. Among the contemporary writers who can measure up to Orwell and Wells, Cowley quotes Christopher Hitchens (now deceased), Martin Amis and Ian McEwan. He adds that *What a Carve Up!* is a good political novel – although it was dismissed by some critics as a 'political tract' (Gilroy, 2011, 200) – but that Coe is not a political writer in the way Orwell and Wells were, perhaps because Coe wants his novels

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to entertain readers rather than be overtly didactic. For Jacques Rancière and Adorno, as Laurent Mellet points out, a work of art is political precisely when it resists the temptation of political commitment (190–91). The balance Coe is aiming for may be symbolized by the film about the arms market that a character of *What a Carve Up!* dreams of making, ‘a subject which called for the politics of a Ken Loach or a Frederick Wiseman, combined with the outrageous plot and seductive glamour of a James Bond movie’ (371).

Nevertheless, in our ‘resolutely post-ideological age’, Cowley notes a waning of the political and the ideological, and a lack of attention to issues of class in contemporary literature. He is echoed by such scholars as Dominic Head (2002), Philip Tew (2004) and Laurence Driscoll (2009) who contend that writers of the British literary establishment such as Coe, as well as Zadie Smith, Ian McEwan, Kazuo Ishiguro, Graham Swift, Will Self and Martin Amis, have constituted a middle-class canon which tends to erase the working-class subject and reassert bourgeois ideology. While Coe ironically admits to being a ‘bourgeois writer’, referring to the standard description of the novel as ‘a bourgeois form’ (2013d), the working class is not totally absent from his fiction. In *The Dwarves of Death* (1990), although William has ‘had a nicely cosseted middle-class upbringing on the outskirts of Sheffield’ (56), he goes on to work in a record shop and lives on a depressing council estate in South-East London, populated by pregnant women with several children, jobless men with tattoos and Alsatians, and kids with skinhead haircuts shouting obscenities, a place that makes you feel ‘suicidally depressed’ and where ‘there are no fucking buses’ on a Sunday (79). Despite this, William feels fortunate to have a roof over his head while ‘a couple of miles away, men and women were sleeping in cardboard boxes under Waterloo bridge’ (154). When he lived in a council flat in Bermondsey, Coe remembers noticing: ‘The homeless are everywhere’ (2013d).

However, such cases of interest in the underclass and the down-trodden are relatively rare in Coe’s work, possibly because he recognizes the dangers inherent in successful middle-class writers attempting to ventriloquize those below them in an apparent economic-social order. Coe admits he does not ‘know enough about the lives of working class men and women to write about them with real confidence’ (2013d). In an article on contemporary London novels, he aptly points out that ‘many of the most successful

British writers live in London, command large advances for their novels, inhabit some of the capital's most gracious districts, and own substantial homes' (although this is not so in Coe's case), and he very pertinently asks: 'is this really the best vantage point from which to chronicle the lives of the underprivileged and the urban poor?' (1996a, 320). In *The House of Sleep*, a film producer derides the angry young men and middle-class lefties of the late 1950s: 'every other movie was made by some public school-educated romantic giving us his view of working-class life' (202). In *The Closed Circle*, Benjamin shares his doubts about his legitimacy as a writer in the new millennium: 'I'm a middle-aged, middle-class, white, public school-, Oxbridge-educated male. Isn't the world sick of hearing from people like me now? Haven't we had our say? Isn't it about time we shut up and moved over and made way for somebody else?' (259). One cannot help but feel that such rhetorical questions may well mirror Coe's own sincere and honest misgivings about his status.

Apart from an interest in current social and political issues, a central dimension of Coe's work is his attachment to humour, comedy and satire. Coe remarks that 'the need for laughter is universal and absolute' and he remembers his childhood when laughter was 'something that drew people together ... something shared. It forged bonds of sympathy between people, among friends and among families'. He recalls that his first ambition was to 'become a television comedian' and then 'a writer whose words would make people laugh', and he calls the Monty Python, Spike Milligan, Flann O'Brien and Laurence Sterne 'entertainers', adding: 'it's one of the highest compliments in the English language'. As he became aware of the different 'kinds of laughter: melancholy laughter, mad laughter, despairing laughter, angry laughter', Coe realized that 'laughter itself could be a weapon in the battle against injustice' (2013d).

As a writer of comic fiction who has been praised for his self-deprecatory humour, Coe has often been placed within a tradition of serio-comic British writing incorporating Evelyn Waugh, Tom Sharpe and David Lodge, but also P.G. Wodehouse whom Coe called 'the elephant in my comic room' (2013d) and whom Thomas Foley (in *Expo* 58) reads 'for a bit of light relief' (37). While Coe's grandfather – a man who 'had a deep vein of warm, ironic humour' – enjoyed the creator of Jeeves, Coe admits he had been

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for a long time ‘stupidly snobbish about Wodehouse and reluctant even to read him’ because of the lack of satire and moral seriousness in his novels. When he finally decided to read Wodehouse, he immediately admired his ‘pure, unpolluted humour’ and declared: ‘all humour should really aspire to the condition of Wodehouse’ (2013d). In *The Closed Circle*, a character is working on ‘a history of English humour, starting with Chaucer and coming up to P.G. Wodehouse’ (375), and in the short story ‘V.O.’, the local French translator Henri, wearing ‘a three-piece, double-breasted tweed suit’ and smoking ‘a shockingly pungent meerschaum pipe’, is ‘busily engaged upon an as yet unpublished French edition of the complete works of P. G. Wodehouse’. His ‘plummy English drawl’ and vocabulary recall those of Wodehouse’s characters, with expressions such as ‘old bean’, ‘old fellow’, ‘Blighty’, ‘a jolly poor show’ or ‘Toodle-pip’ (2014a), which also pepper *Expo 58*.

For Coe, it is ‘in the field of comedy ... that we find some of Britain’s most impressive post-war cultural achievements’ (1994d, 10) and he himself is drawn to the kind of humour found in the *Carry On* films and such figures of British post-war comedy as Tony Hancock, Eddie Braben and the Two Ronnies (Barker and Corbett). Coe remembers Kenneth Williams and Frankie Howerd in *Carry On Doctor*, both gay and in the closet, both ‘fully tapped into that vein of sexual subterfuge and masquerade which has always been central to the British sense of humour’ (2013d), and in the short story ‘Ivy and her Nonsense’, during a game of charades, the protagonist impersonates British comedians Tommy Cooper and Harry Worth. Coe is also a great fan of such situation comedies as *Porridge* (first shown on the BBC from 1974 to 1977 and repeated ever since) or light entertainment programmes such as *The Morecambe and Wise Show*, which the Trotters watch on Christmas night in *The Rotters’ Club* (272), like so many other Britons. It is while watching the show and imagining millions of families ‘convulsed with joy’ that Benjamin surmises that ‘perhaps his ambitions were all wrong – his desire to be a writer, his wish to be a composer – and that to be a bringer of laughter was in fact the holiest, most sacred of callings’ (274). In an article on British comedy and the *Carry On* series, Coe alludes to the ‘great divide between elitism and populism’ in Britain, to ‘our chronic inability to reconcile the competing claims of high and low culture’ (2013d). He remarks elsewhere: ‘There is a bit of snobbery, about what is high art and

low art' (in Lakin) and praises Umberto Eco for his genuine and uncondescending love of popular fiction (1989b).

Like Salman Rushdie, Coe has always strived to reconcile these claims in his work, combining cinema, television and literature. He explains that the satirical British sitcom *Yes Minister* (BBC Television, 1980–84) was a 'source of inspiration' (2010b) for *What a Carve Up!*, together with the satirical puppet show *Spitting Image* (ITV, 1984–96) and the early 1960s comedy stage revue *Beyond the Fringe*, considered as seminal to the rise of satirical comedy in Britain. In *The Closed Circle*, Coe pays indirect homage to one of its performers, Peter Cook, by quoting his line: 'I've learned from my mistakes, and I'm sure I could repeat them perfectly', and identifying its author merely as 'some crusty old pillar of the British establishment' (5).

As a child, Coe would watch *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin*, broadcast on the BBC between 1976 and 1979, and based on a 1974 novel by David Nobbs, which Coe first read when he was 15 and to which he wrote a preface for an Italian edition in 2011. Built on 'the collision of two seemingly incompatible modes: high seriousness, and low comedy', Nobbs's novel deals with a middle-aged sales executive driven to despair by the monotony and triviality of his job. In so doing, it depicts the stagnant and drab British society of the 1970s, yet 'manages to find joy in the trivial and creates farce out of monotony' (Coe, 2013d). As a 15-year-old teenager, Coe found in Nobbs's book 'the perfect crystallisation of [his] own hazy literary vision' as, at that time, he wanted 'to write something that offered a portrait of society as a whole, but filtered through the individual consciousness', and that intertwined humour and melancholy (2013d). Coe told Philip Tew that the book's 'combination of melancholy, satire, farce, seriousness and a distinctive melange of tones' may have found their way into *What a Carve Up!* (in Tew, 2008, 37). A comic quote from Nobbs's novel is used as one of the epigraphs to *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*, thus announcing the tone of the book, while the character who tells the story of Donald Crowhurst (who faked a voyage around the world by boat) has a friend called Martin Wellbourne, the name assumed by Reginald Perrin after he faked his suicide (45). Coe's fascination for Nobbs's use of the absurd – 'a vein of absurdism which recalled Flann O'Brien, and the early novels of Samuel Beckett' – has thus partly influenced his own creation:

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'Nobbs's critique of consumerism, industrialisation and globalisation ... is truly radical: to imply that capitalism is absurd, after all, is far more scathing than simply to point out its failings and corruptions' (2013d).

The absurdist perspective is not one that is usually applied to Coe's novels, and yet, from his early novels, Coe has clearly been drawn to that approach, praising for instance N.F. Simpson as 'Britain's greatest postwar absurdist playwright' for the way he 'combined the rarefied absurdism of Ionesco with the downtrodden melancholy of the suburban sitcom' (2013d). On the other hand, Coe says he has been intent on trying to avoid irony, 'that baneful, ubiquitous, superior mindset which has gripped so many people (especially in the media) in the post-Thatcher years' (2013d). In *The Rotters' Club*, in particular, he tried to portray the mid-1970s without looking down on the characters when considering them from the perspective of 'our notably glossier, spin-doctored, Starbucks-infested era' (2013d).

Coe has often been called a satirist, following the tradition of Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope and Henry Fielding. Coe himself wrote about *Gulliver's Travels* in an essay in 2007 and adapted the novel as a children's book in 2011 under the title *The Story of Gulliver* for an Italian series called *Save the Story*, which invited authors from around the world to retell one of their favourite stories. In *The Closed Circle*, Doug Anderton refers to Swift but the allusion is comically lost on the editor of the newspaper he is working for (124). Among other things, Coe admires *Gulliver's Travels* for its 'concentrated and calculated intensification of satiric outrage', a book Swift wrote 'to vex the world, rather than divert it' (Coe, 2013d). Satire differs from humour in that the former is usually endowed with a moral purpose, advocating a better world. The specificity of Coe's satire might be that it is more ethical than moralising because it appeals to the reader's empathy. According to Northrop Frye, in *Anatomy of Criticism*, 'two things are essential to satire; one is wit or humour founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd, the other is an object of attack' (224). In Coe's novels, but more particularly in *What a Carve Up!* – which, according to Coe, is 'the only genuinely satirical book' he has ever written (in Armitstead) – all kinds of domains of contemporary life are subjected to the irreverent gaze of satire, be it the world of advertisement, new technology, educational reforms, the academic

microcosm, the press, television, private enterprise, Thatcherism, New Labour, investment banking, the National Health Service or food production. Coe's satire is militant as it is obvious where his allegiances lie.

However, reflecting on *What a Carve Up!* some 17 years after its publication, Coe finds the book 'preachy' (2011), maybe because it lacks what, in his PhD thesis on Fielding's *Tom Jones*, he described as 'a quality which we nowadays tend to expect of satire if it is not to fall into preachiness, namely a sense of complicity with the objects satirised' (1986, 295). In addition, Coe remarks that the problem with most satire is that 'it preaches to the converted', sharing rather than challenging their assumptions (2011). For satire (but also irony) to be efficient, the reader must indeed share the same standards as the implied author, and thus, to quote Wayne Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, feel 'a sense of collusion with the silent author' against the butt of the satirical or ironical attacks (304). Coe goes so far as to argue that there is too much political satire in modern Britain and too little opposition to it as a majority of people share the same acceptable rhetoric, including part of the political establishment (at least in public): 'What was, back in the 1960s, a genuinely galvanising movement, sweeping aside centuries of conservatism and deference, has now become a sort of toothless default setting' (2010b). To quote Paul Gilroy, Coe's 'refined sense of the absurdity of contemporary political culture is attuned to the possibility that in Britain greed and selfishness have been normalized to such an extent that satire becomes effectively impossible' (198). Satire will not tear down the established order and people will not take to the streets. Instead, satire:

creates a welcoming space in which like-minded people can gather together and share in comfortable hilarity. The anger, the feelings of injustice they might have been suffering beforehand are gathered together, compressed and transformed into bursts of laughter, and after discharging them they feel content and satisfied. An impulse that might have translated into action is, therefore, rendered neutral and harmless.

(Gilroy, 2011, 198)

The political and economic establishment can feel safe as the balance will not be upset. In his thesis dissertation, Coe had already

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referred to this conservative type of satire which resolves ‘into a comfortable feeling (laughter)’ (1986, 105). In 2013, Coe identified ‘a growing disillusionment with the role played by laughter in the national political discourse’ and argued that ‘Britain’s much-vaunted tradition of political satire was itself an obstruction to real social change, since it diverted everyone’s contrarian impulses into harmless laughter’ (2013d). Referring to such revues as *The Last Laugh* and *Beyond the Fringe* (in the late 1950s), *That Was the Week That Was* (in the 1960s) and *Have I Got News for You* (in the 1990s and 2000s), Coe affirms that anti-establishment humour has become innocuous and can no longer be subversive: ‘laughter is not just ineffectual as a form of protest, but ... it actually replaces protest’ and becomes ‘a substitute for thought rather than its conduit’ (2013d). As everything becomes subversive and everyone becomes cynical, Britain is ‘sinking giggling into the sea’, to quote Peter Cook in the 1960s (in Coe, 2013d), and the politicians, economists or bankers who should be made accountable for what happens in the country are gently let off the hook. Instead of disrupting the established order, laughter, ‘a unifying, not a dividing force’, ‘brings us comfort, and draws us into a circle of closeness with our fellow human beings’. Rather than force us into action, into trying to change the world, satire is ‘one of the most powerful weapons we have for preserving the *status quo*’ (Coe, 2013d). This is what Coe depicts in *The Closed Circle*, when the New Labour MP Paul Trotter is invited to ‘a satirical TV show: a weekly panel game on which young comedians would sit around making scathing jokes about the news, sometimes joined by a high-profile politician’ (68). Although the invited MPs often have to face a ‘barrage of mockery’ (68), they know their careers will not be fundamentally disrupted by it. Satire thus ‘actually suppresses political anger rather than stoking it up. Political energies which might otherwise be translated into action are instead channelled into comedy and released – dissipated – in the form of laughter’ (Coe, 2011). This dissatisfaction might explain why, after *What a Carve Up!*, Coe turned towards a gentler form of humour and comedy, tinged with melancholy.

Already as a teenager and as an apprentice writer, Coe recalls that his ‘sensibility was being pulled in two different directions – towards humour and towards melancholy – and [he] wanted to find a way of writing that would reconcile these two opposite

approaches' (2013d). He refers to Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (one of B.S. Johnson's favourite books) as 'a masterpiece of humour' (2013d) and takes his cue from Italo Calvino in his lectures on the value of literature, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, when he writes about the 'lightness of thoughtfulness' and 'thoughtful lightness', and points to the 'special connection between melancholy and humour': 'As melancholy is sadness that has taken on lightness, so humour is comedy that has lost its bodily weight' (in Coe, 2013d). If B.S. Johnson invites the reader 'to share in a private sadness', Coe himself has 'been writing about loneliness and depression for most of [his] working life now, from one book to another' (Coe, 2013d), and the vein of melancholy which runs through all his novels is buried under the comedy, satire and social commentary.

Will Self has described his friend as 'quiet and melancholy' and Coe himself considers the novel as 'an introvert's form' (in Laity). The author's wry humour and thoughtful melancholy are often directed against his male characters, who are portrayed as self-effacing, isolated, unassuming. If two of Coe's novels offer portraits of female characters – the emotionally crippled Maria in *The Accidental Woman* and the reminiscing and nostalgic Rosamond in *The Rain Before it Falls* – his other books dwell on figures of weak masculinity or, as Coe puts it, 'passive, slightly depressed men – often failed writers or composers or both – who show a rather uncommitted sexuality and tend to fixate on past romantic disappointments' (2011). Among those are Robin Grant in *A Touch of Love*, Michael Owen in *What a Carve Up!*, Robert in *The House of Sleep*, Benjamin Trotter in *The Rotters' Club* and *The Closed Circle*, the anti-hero of *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*, and Thomas Foley in *Expo 58*.

In *The Rotters' Club*, Benjamin describes himself as just 'an ordinary teenager in an ordinary family' (275), with 'no natural authority ... None at all' (292). He believes he has been assigned 'little more than a walk-on part' in his own life: 'Sometimes I feel that I am destined always to be offstage whenever the main action occurs. ... I feel that my role is simply to be a spectator to other people's stories, and always wander away at the most important moment, drifting into the kitchen to make a cup of tea just as the denouement unfolds' (107, 389). Doug, whose destiny it is 'always to be at the centre of things' (389), warns him: 'You won't take life by

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the throat and give it a good old shaking. You'll never do that, will you, Benjamin? You'll never take your chances.' (147) – prophecies which will be confirmed in *The Closed Circle* when Malvina describes Benjamin as 'the king of understatement' (103). In *The House of Sleep*, Robert defines himself as 'weak and indecisive' (239), and Coe conceived Maxwell Sim as an Everyman, wanting 'to make him as ordinary as possible: an ordinary man, doing an ordinary job in an ordinary town' (Website, *Sim*). Thomas Foley's 'distinguishing feature' in *Expo 58* is his quietness (2). Many scenes involve these anti-heroes in comic and ludicrous situations reminiscent of some of the best productions by Tom Sharpe or David Lodge.

These indecisive rudderless characters – who Coe says are all a part of himself and who recall the middle-aged lonely male protagonists of Nobbs's *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin* and Gray's 1982, *Janine* – often fail to fulfil their dreams, whether this means the completion of a book, the achievement of a satisfactory relationship or a successful professional career. As vulnerable heroes longing for an ideal and selfless love (Michael for Shirley Eaton in *What a Carve Up!*, Benjamin for Cicely in *The Rotters' Club*), they look like paler versions of the archetype of the knight in medieval romances, on a quest for an unreachable goal. In their inability to seize the propitious moment, they resemble Britain, teasingly described by Coe as 'world leader in the field of anti-climax, of missed opportunities' (2013d). In *The Rotters' Club*, Benjamin, who has only been able to 'snatch a moment's eye contact' with Claire Newman, finds himself gripped 'by an overwhelming sense of lost opportunity' (95).

While Coe's male heterosexual characters are often presented as inadequate and helpless in their love lives, homosexual and lesbian relationships are usually portrayed in a more positive light. According to José Ramón Prado Pérez, 'the crisis of masculinity addressed by male writers indicates both the historical appearance and acceptance of various sexualities in society, and the direct reaction against the conservative ideology, mostly masculine in its principle of fiery competition and individualism' (971). Female homosexuality is a familiar feature in Coe's novels and the recurrence of certain names is striking, suggesting hidden links between the books: in *The Accidental Woman*, Maria has a comforting relationship with Sarah; in *The House of Sleep*, Veronica first goes out with Sarah and then lives with Rebecca for nearly 11 years; in

*The Rain Before it Falls*, Rosamond has long-term relationships with Rebecca and then Ruth; in *The Closed Circle*, Cicely and Helen are believed to have been lovers (199). Contrary to the series of disastrous heterosexual pairings, some of these relationships are presented as serene and satisfactory, offering a welcome alternative. Rosamond and Rebecca are fortunate to have found ‘someone with whom you can share absolutely everything’ (141), and later in life, Rosamond and Ruth, who have been ‘lifelong companions’ (254), have eased into a comfortable silence. Male homosexuality is less smooth and often not entirely assumed: in *A Touch of Love*, Aparna accuses Robin of ‘flirting with homosexuality’ (176) without making a clear decision; in *Expo 58*, Thomas’s face is ‘pinkening with indignation’ when he understands he is being asked if he is a homosexual (38). At the end of *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*, Max finally recognizes his father’s homosexuality as well as his own, but the promise of a harmonious homosexual relationship is curtailed by the author who suddenly appears in the novel and kills off his character with a click of his fingers. Male characters thus often remain in an in-between position, indecisive as to their sexuality and desires.

Coe’s novels cover a wide narrative spectrum that ranges from relatively daring experiments in his first three novels, exploiting such devices as self-reflexivity and embedded narratives, to more conventional and linear narratives in his most recent novels, including his latest, *Expo 58. What a Carve Up!*, and to a lesser extent *The Rotters’ Club* and *The Closed Circle*, include a multiplicity of genres and narrative modes, meant to reflect the plural and fragmented dimension of contemporary society. Both *What a Carve Up!* and *The House of Sleep* exploit the device of overlapping and intertwined narratives, and in these two novels, the frontiers between fiction and reality, dreams and the real world, are often blurred so that both characters and readers wonder about the ontological status of events, a question that is familiar to readers of eighteenth-century as well as postmodernist fiction.

In *The Closed Circle*, Benjamin describes the type of novel he is writing: ‘what I’m trying to achieve ... is a new way of combining text – printed text – with the spoken word. It’s a novel with music, ... there’s going to be a CD-Rom. And some passages you have to read on the screen ... The text scrolls down at intervals that I’ve programmed myself ... and certain passages of the

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text trigger bits of music' (257). Richard Bradford sums it up as a groundbreaking epic 'combining prose narrative with CD, visual images and music to create a genre of its own, capable of capturing those dense layerings of immediate and objective experience which resist the linearity of standard prose fiction' (45). Benjamin never gets to write that novel but it may hint at the type of creation Coe would have achieved if he had chosen to be more of an experimental writer. He said he could 'envisage a kind of multimedia novel' which would bring music, images and text even further to the centre of what he is doing (in Guignery, 2013, 37). In 2001, Coe recorded an album of music and readings entitled *9th & 13th* (in collaboration with French singer Louis Philippe and Danny Manners), a 'peculiar collection of melodies and recitatifs' which he says 'represents a small but significant step towards one of [his] long-held goals as a writer: finding a new way of integrating music and the spoken word' (2001b). Coe's novels include numerous references to music and films, especially pop and rock songs and bands from the 1970s (in *The Dwarves of Death* and *The Rotters' Club*) and the 1980s, deploying such popular cultural coordinates in a way that is reminiscent of Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) and *The Black Album* (1989), Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity* (1995) or Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999). Arguably, the intermediality of Coe's work also echoes the modernist call for hybridity and for the crossing of frontiers between arts in order to explore the limits of the literary.

The combination of references to literature, popular films and television shows in Coe's novels testifies to a deconstruction of the hierarchy between genres and a preference for syncretism that is emblematic of the postmodernist episteme. Although Coe's production is sometimes described as realist and conventional, it really oscillates between postmodernist inventivity and more traditional narratives, emotion and comedy, nostalgia for the past and political commitment to the here and now. Through the devices of pastiche and parody, and the intermingling of various literary traditions, Coe interrogates the notion of Englishness with irony, emphasizing the corruptness of the contemporary world. He also raises more intimate questions about individual identity, moving beyond the supposed playfulness of postmodernism to encompass broader issues and combine epistemological and ontological concerns.

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